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ABSTRACT

This article examines the conditions that will help teachers improve the reading comprehension of learning disabled students: (1) allow more time; (2) build a framework for comprehension; (3) intervene in the process; (4) engage the learner; (5) match student and material; and (6) expect students to succeed. Two figures are included. (RS)

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Working With Slow Readers, Slow Learners

by Carl B. Smith

My daughter just started teaching — second grade. Most of her kids are fine, but two of them are driving her crazy. One little girl, for example, challenges her daily: "Well, Miss Smith, what are you going to do about that?" Eventually my daughter will learn how to manage that kind of offensive, confrontational behavior. But her second case is the one that will haunt her throughout her career. He is a nice little fellow who works hard but can't seem to learn to read and to write.

This boy's mother works with him at home, reading to him and reading alongside him. He has a tutor at school. He tries with all his might, even to the point of tears, but the symbols and the words won't stick. Though apparently learned today at great pain, tomorrow they will be gone. The plight of this boy breaks my daughter's heart, just as your heart suffers over similar children in your class. The question is: what do we know about problem learners that will help us guide them?

Conditions That Help Disabled Learners

Allow More Time

Instead of reviewing all the characteristics of learning disabled (LD) students, let's examine the conditions that will help us improve comprehension for those learners. We know, of course, that the LD reader reads more slowly than the non-disabled learner and therefore either we have to allow him more time to complete a task or we have to adjust the material to enable him to complete the reading assignment. One way to adjust is to limit the scope of the assignment by asking the LD reader to find specific kinds of information. These readers would then be expected to participate in class discussions only to the extent that they had engaged the text. Another way to limit the load for the LD reader is to pair him with a more capable reader who will help in identifying main ideas and in summarizing the essential points of the reading.

Build a Framework for Comprehension

One of the reasons that these learners read more slowly is that they seem less able to identify the organization of a passage (Wong & Wilson, 1984). Since efficient comprehension relies on the reader's ability to see the pattern or the direction that the writer is taking, teachers can help LD readers by spending more time on building background for the reading selection, both in the general sense of concept building and in the specific sense of creating a mental scheme for the text organization. A narrative scheme is usually well established in learners, and so they can follow a story that involves characters in working on an issue to some conclusion. (See a sample story map in Figure 1.) But when the text compares governments or looks for the cause and effects of biological or chemical reactions, the learner may need the teacher to draw a diagram or to model the reasoning process needed to understand the passage.

START
1. _____ and _____ were best friends.
"It was just like before. _____."
2. Felita became angry with _____.
a. Gigi hadn't told _____.
b. Gigi got the part of _____.
3. Felita talked to _____.
"Friendship is _____."
4. _____ and _____ talked.
Felita
a. Gigi explained that she wanted _____.
b. Felita hadn't known _____.

Figure 1. Some stories seem to go in circles. The way the story ends is very similar to the way in which it began.

"Building background, semantic maps, and prediction strategies are the kinds of readiness activities that increase comprehension among LD readers."

Tama & Martinez, 1986

It is probably best to make a simple diagram, one that helps the LD reader rather than confuses. In a story called "A Trunk Full of History" by Susan Nanus, events in 1905 are compared with current events. To help the reader manage this type of organization, the teacher could ask students to construct answers to a comparison chart like the one in Figure 2.

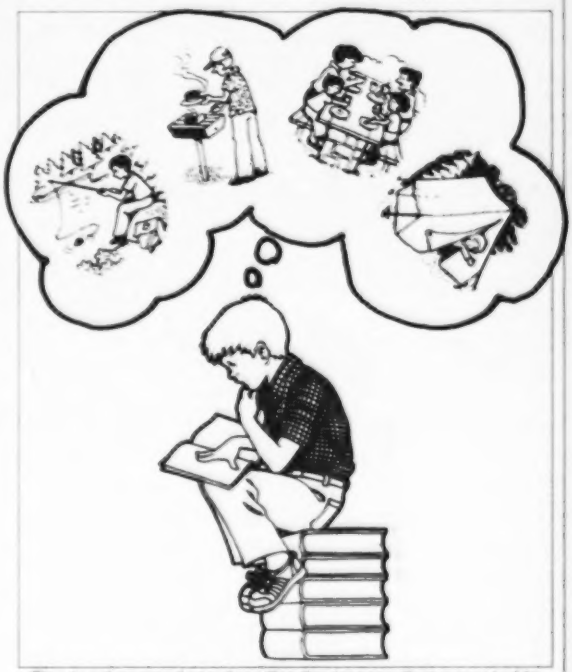
	1905	Today
1. Common Entertainment		movie theater
2. Common Transportation		car
3. Way to Chill Food	icebox	
4. Way to Communicate	messenger	
5. Where to Buy Things		
6. On Dairy Road		
7. On Saw Mill Road		
8. On Main Street		

Figure 2

Intervene in the Process

The direct intervention of teachers in the comprehension process increases reading comprehension in LD learners (Bos, 1982). These learners often need help with vocabulary and need reminders to summarize as they proceed or to ask themselves questions about what they are reading. When the teacher is directly involved in the passage with them, the teacher can prompt thinking or can provide an insight into the language that may otherwise elude the LD reader.

One major successful strategy for LD readers is to generate visual images of what is being read (Carnine and Kinder, 1985). It should be evident that the student cannot generate images if he is unable to first recognize the word. Assuming he knows how to recognize words, the reader needs concepts to visualize the flow of action represented on the page. The same kind of concept building techniques that work for normal learners also work for LD readers. Association exercises in the form of word webs, for example, help all types of learners appreciate the range of related concepts that a community of learners can call forth. Usually the LD reader gains more from concrete experiences and images than from abstract discussions. Pictures, physical action, demonstrations, practice using words in interviews or in an exchange of views among peers are only a few of the ways that teachers can make the key vocabulary take root in the reader's mind.



The teacher needs to describe the images that occur in his own mind as he reads a passage, thus giving the students a concrete sense of what visual imagery means.

Direct intervention implies some direct teaching. We often ask students to summarize a story or a passage. LD readers, who find it difficult to understand the organization of text, however, will probably not know how to summarize. Thus the teacher can demonstrate the process by using a simple paragraph and a group interaction as described here:

Display the following on the chalkboard:

Summer Camp

Janet and Judy went to Banner Lodge Camp last summer. Camp activites in the morning included pottery making, painting, and basketry. In the afternoon, the campers could choose activities such as tennis, swimming, and baseball.

Have a volunteer read the paragraph.

What is the main idea of this paragraph? (Janet and Judy went camping last summer.)

Write the main idea on the chalkboard. Ask students to list all the details on the chalkboard in the following manner.

morning activities: pottery making, painting, basketry
afternoon activities: tennis, swimming, baseball

Remind students that in a summary they do not want to list every detail. *What general term or category describes the morning activities?* (arts and crafts) *What general term or category describes the afternoon activities?* (sports)

Ask students to state this information in a sentence. Write the sentence on the chalkboard below the main idea sentence. Answers will vary but students may suggest:

> The camp offered arts and crafts in the morning and sports in the afternoon.

Have students combine the two sentences into a summary statement on their own paper. When they are finished, have them share their summaries with the group. Summaries will vary but should be similar to the following.

> Janet and Judy went to a camp that offered arts and crafts activities in the morning and sports in the afternoon.

That's the way the mind works in summarizing.

"By starting with spontaneous reactions the LD reader sees that reading allows his real feelings to emerge, even though stimulated by a fairy tale."

Engage the Learner

"Educators have identified the learning disabled reader as a passive learner, a learner who does not spontaneously become involved in the learning process" (Tama & Martinez, 1986, p. 15). Yet the research indicates that these students can improve their comprehension if they are given the skills they need to manage the material. That means that the teacher needs to analyze the key skill or strategy needed to comprehend a passage and to demonstrate that skill for the learning disabled student. The teacher cannot simply tell the student to use visual images, he has to describe the images that occur in his own mind as he reads a particular passage, thus giving the students a concrete sense of what visual imagery means.

Similarly with a self-questioning strategy, it does not suffice to tell LD readers to ask themselves questions. The teacher can read aloud and insert the kinds of questions that he would ask himself at various points in the reading. Or the teacher can retype the material and insert parenthetical questions as a demonstration of how the reader needs to stay involved. Even though those insertions may not be the questions that interest a specific reader, they demonstrate the kinds of activity and the frequency of questions that the reader could ask (Wong & Jones, 1982). Sample questions could include:

- Does this make sense to me?
- Do I believe it?
- Why would a character act like this?
- Is this event similar to any experience that I have had?
- Where is the author leading me now? This seems a strange twist of direction.
- If some point here is not clear, should I take the time to get information to clarify it?

Perhaps one of the most effective means to engage the learner is to show that his or her opinion is valued. We need to let them react spontaneously—as human beings want to do when they feel valued. For instance, in the primary grades, the "Ugly Duckling" creates a natural opportunity to discuss why a person needs to feel that he belongs to a group, has friends, feels accepted. By starting with spontaneous reactions the LD reader sees that reading allows his real feelings to emerge, even though stimulated by a fairy tale. Once that reality is established we can then work on other things that have specific academic purposes.

Match Student and Material

A major issue in teaching LD readers is the level of material to be used—ability level or grade level? And the answer seems to be—both.

As is the case with most learners, LD readers learn most comfortably in materials that are written on their ability level (Clark et al, 1984). If a person in the seventh grade can read independently only at a fourth grade level, that means they can learn self-questioning, using visual images, and summarizing with those ability level materials. They can concentrate on the application of a skill or strategy without having to struggle with difficult vocabulary and concepts. Once the skill or strategy is learned and the students feel successful, then students may apply those skills to grade level materials. This direction is not unlike swimming. First teach children to swim in shallow (safe) water, then they will venture more confidently into deep water.

Suppose, for instance, that you wanted to learn how to summarize social studies articles. Besides asking for advice on how others gather their thoughts for a summary (teacher demonstration), you would want to practice on a fairly simple text so you could get into the rhythm of summarizing and become skilled at it before tackling a more difficult text.

Though the reading level is one concern, teachers can select materials that help LD readers in other ways:

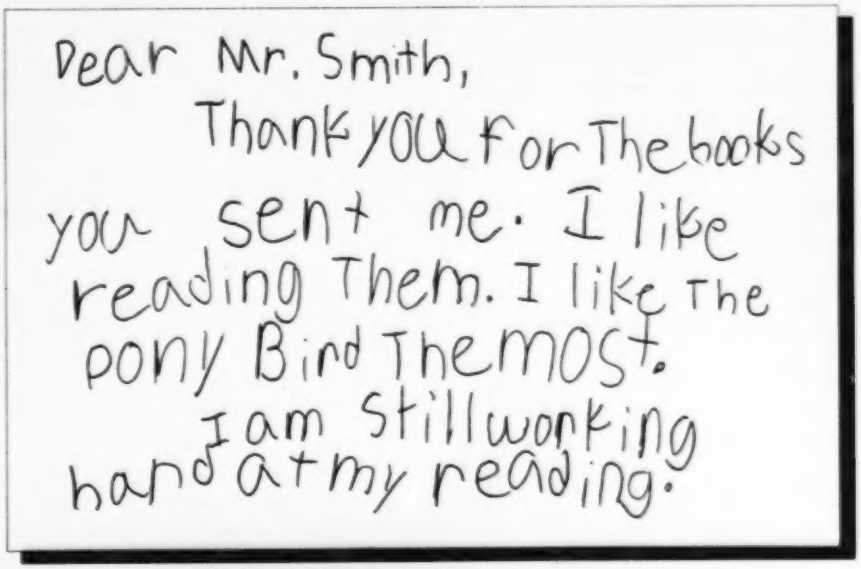
- reduced number of difficult words
- direct, non-convoluted syntax
- short passages that deliver clear messages
- subheads that organize the flow of ideas
- helpful illustrations

Expect Students to Succeed

The power of the teacher's expectation for learning has a marvelous effect on students (Jacobson, 1968, Pygmallion in the Classroom). If we allow a student's slowness or lack of organization to create a negative attitude in our minds, the student senses that expectation and inexorably grinds away towards expected nonperformance. But if our attitude reflects positive expectations, the Pygmallion effect takes over. The student rises to meet our expectations.

As teachers, we also create expectations for ourselves. One of those expectations is that we can help every student make progress. Part of the challenge of reaching that goal is to search for ways that we can help all students learn. Some students need more direct attention to learn to read and to write. Students who learn slowly, sometimes called learning disabled, are among that group.

By the way — The little boy that I mentioned at the outset of this bulletin is showing his timbre. After four months in second grade he sent me this note:


Dear Mr. Smith,
Thank you for the books
you sent me. I like
reading them. I like the
pony Bird the most.
I am still working
hard at my reading.

This bulletin may be duplicated for educational purposes only

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